



# STATE OF CONNECTICUT

## STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



### Connecticut General Assembly Appropriations Committee Testimony of Interim Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell March 3, 2015

Thank you Senator Bye, Representative Walker, Senator Kane, Representative Ziobron and members of the Appropriations Committee for the opportunity today to review Governor Malloy's budget recommendations for the next biennium.

The Department has made substantial progress over the last four years in implementing policies that have targeted Connecticut's achievement gap and elevated learning and teaching in K-12 education. Thanks to Governor Malloy's leadership, and with strong support from the Legislature, graduation rates are on the rise, Connecticut's status as a national leader on such measures as NAEP has been affirmed, and schools and districts that have long struggled have started to turn the corner.

#### **Level Funding: Statutory Entitlements**

This budget reinforces the Governor's commitment to K-12 education, and the Department's stewardship of time, learning and resources.

Over the past three years, a total of nearly \$150 million in increased ECS funding has flowed to school districts. Notably, and despite limited resources and difficult choices, the Governor has proposed level funding for statutory entitlements for education for the biennium. While other states have retrenched during difficult budget times, the Governor's budget again preserves critical education investments.

#### **Alliance Districts and Commissioner's Network**

The Governor's budget continues our commitment to revitalize high need districts and schools through the Alliance District program and Commissioner's Network structure. Alliance Districts are among the state's 30 most chronically underperforming districts, where 40% of Connecticut's students and teachers attend school and work each day. The Commissioner's Network has now grown to 16 schools, located in nine school districts throughout the state. The Governor's proposal would allow for up to 8 schools in a single district to participate in the network in one year, creating a local infrastructure of academic support that will continue long after a school's participation in the network.

It is important to note that as conceived, schools are designed to enter the Commissioner's Network and stay for 3-5 years, while adopting best practices and embedding transformative strategies. The Department anticipates that some of the first cohort of Network schools will soon be eligible to graduate, ready to sustain progress on their own.

Alliance Districts have received over \$133 million in additional investments that has flowed directly to the district over the past three years. Initiatives have directed resources, state support, attention, and urgency in efforts to jumpstart reforms. Using early measures such as student engagement and

attendance, school climate, and renewed focus on learning and instruction, both programs have shown great potential to make impacts in the near term. Their future remains secure in the proposed budget, and will continue to empower schools and districts to improve outcomes for our students.

### **School-Based Diversion Initiative**

Notably, the Governor's budget allocates \$1 million for implementation and expansion of the School-Based Diversion Initiative, or SBDI. The program is designed to increase school cohesion with, and utilization of, community agencies as partners and reduce school-based arrests. The SBDI program shows great promise and demonstrates real results for students. The Department considers SBDI as a responsible, and critical, component of the Governor's "Second Chance Society" initiative and strongly supports the expansion of this initiative.

### **Public School Choice Models**

The budget recommendations also preserve a commitment to high-quality public school choice models, including the necessary resources to support the one year extension of the court-ordered *Sheff v. O'Neill*, Phase Three stipulated agreement.

Interdistrict magnet school programs will continue to experience growth statewide - even with the extension of statutory enrollment cap provisions. The system is projected to grow by 1,836 students statewide in FY 2016 and an additional 819 students in FY 2017. The budget also proposes to fund a total of 2,058 new charter schools seats in the coming biennium. Two new schools approved by the State Board of Education in April 2014 will open in school year 2015-16 with 418 students. Currently, there are 22 charter schools, including one local charter school in New Haven, offering a high-quality public school option in communities across the state.

Again, charter school investments are paired with smart and thoughtful policy recommendations: improvements to existing statutes that will raise charter school and charter management organization accountability and transparency, require adoption of anti-nepotism and conflict of interest policies, establish greater academic and organizational performance targets, and foster sharing of best practices with their home districts.

Whether through our state technical high school system, or other high-quality models like magnets and charters, public school choice empowers parents to substantially engage in their children's education.

Similar to other state agencies, the recommended budget is not without some difficult news for education, in particular having to do with grant funding for a variety of programs. The Department believes, at least in part, that some of the purposes of the grants slated for reduction can be accomplished through existing streams using Alliance District funding and federal dollars. We hope this may offer an opportunity to local districts, which are closest – and most invested - to prioritize and think strategically, with synergies in mind, about these programs.

I thank you again for your invitation today, and I look forward to continued discussions with members of the committee moving forward this session. I would be happy to answer your questions.